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A theory of devotional conservation: A preliminary proposal

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While self-conscious preservation of antiquities is commonly assumed to have originated in the cultural humus of Renaissance humanism, it was at the turn of the twentieth century, in an intellectual climate dominated by the complementary doctrines of historicism and positivism, that conservation-restoration[1] first received both theoretical and methodological definition as a technical/scientific as much as critical/analytical intervention on works of art and architecture. Social concern for the wellbeing of cultural artifacts, in fact, long predates the nineteenth-century preservation movement that gained state support as an aide to the formation of distinct "national" cultures, and even the early modern antiquarianism that treasured antiquities as material media to access the past imaginatively.[2] Moreover, such a concern in the premodern age was by no means exclusive to Western societies. One of the most ancient and venerated cultic sites of Japan's Shinto religion, the timber shrine at Ise (Ise Jingu), undergoes every two decades cyclical re-edification, or what we may call "preemptive restoration" (lastly in 2013), according to ritual and technical procedures that allegedly date back to the third quarter of

[1]Terminology is problematic because of the lexical variances between English and Latinate languages, notably Italian, the language of the main 20c theorists (Luca Beltrami, Camillo Boito, Gustavo Giovannoni, Cesare Brandi). "Conservation" (equivalent to the Italian *restauro*), denotes measures aiming at securing durability of an artifact by cleaning it, repairing minor damages, and preventing further decay; "restoration" (It. *ripristino*) entails returning an artifact to its original state (documented or presumed) by remaking missing parts. The definition of the professional figure of the conservator-restorer, adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), seeks to bypass the terminological quandary. See: "The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession," *ICOM News* 39, 1 (1986): 5-6.

[2]F. Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, trans. L. M. O'Connell (Cambridge, 2001); J. Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford, 1999).

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the first millennium.[3] The Ise Shrine's enduring spatial and spiritual presence in the Japanese landscape is thus a function of the transmission of traditional carpentry's manual knowhow—an instance of "intangible heritage" threatened by the equally intangible decay of artisanal skills.[4]

This paper's key proposition is that premodern conservation, as much as an application of cognitive and embodied knowledge, was an aspect of cult (including state and personality cults) that combined piety and artistry, spirituality and materiality, faith and ideology. An eloquent epigraphic testimony of "devotional conservation," to coin a term, is found in a fourteenth-century stone inscription from Thailand that records the recovery and repair of dilapidated Buddha images to mark the inauguration of a royal monastery. The inscription reads: "They went to search for old broken statues of the Buddha to worship … They brought them there to piece together and repair with mortar, … to mend and restore into large, fresh-looking end exceedingly beautiful images."[5] Even more than for lacking recourse to sophisticated technologies and bureaucratic organizations, and for encompassing approaches that today are methodologically distinct along with others that have been discarded as unsound (such as pastiche and reuse), devotional conservation differs from modern conservation science for conceiving of artifacts transcendentally, as belonging to an eternal cosmic order, rather than historically. A theory of devotional conservation must move from this recognition.

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The incongruity, entailing a dilemma at once practical and philosophical, between the eternal aspiration and the impermanent constitution of monuments erected to honor the immortal gods and to immortalize heroes and champions, was recognized since antiquity.

The Latin poet Lucretius wrote thus in Book V of his *De rerum natura*:

You see that stones are worn away by time
Rocks rot and towers topple. Even the shrines
And images of the gods grow very tired
Develop cracks or wrinkles, their holy wills
Unable to extend their fated term
To litigate against the laws of nature.[6]

[3] K. Tange and N. Kawazoe, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture* (Cambridge, MA, 1965); J.M. Reynolds, "Ise Shrine and a Modernist Construction of Japanese Tradition," *The Art Bulletin* 83, 2 (2001): 316-41.

[4] See K. E. Larsen and N. Marstein, *Conservation of Historic Timber Structures: An Ecological Approach* (Oxford, 2000).

[5] Prasert na Nagara and A. B. Griswold, *Epigraphical and Historical Studies* (Bangkok, 1992), 393.

[6] *The Way Things Are:* The De Rerum Natura *of Titus Lucretius Carus*, trans. R. Humphries (Bloomington, IN,

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For Lucretius, an adept of Epicurus, the decay and demise of animate beings and inanimate things alike was intrinsic to their nature, hence inevitable and not to be lamented. This view largely coincides with the Buddhist doctrinal tenet of impermanence (Sanskrit, *anitya*). In the "Sermon of the Arrow," the Buddha announces: "In this manner the world is afflicted by death and decay. But the wise do not grieve, having realized the nature of the world"; and another canonical text, the *Dhammapada*, states at verse 277: "All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purity." In Buddhism's transformation into a soteriological faith, the principle of impermanence was however disowned by the rise of the cult of corporeal relics of the Buddha and also of commemorative artifacts such as images and architectural reliquaries (*stupa*), which, as repositories of the Buddha's living presence, came to command worship as well as care.[7] A dilapidated stupa is believed to no longer emanate the supernatural energy of the enshrined relic; accordingly, re-erection is often preferred to restoration, also because it accrues more karmic merit to the patron. But restoration itself traditionally entailed the Russian-doll-like enclosing of the ruined stupa into a fresh fabric; this needed not replicate aesthetically the former stupa in order to transmit its memory and reactivate the power of the relic buried within it.[8]

Recent scholarship examines the fusion of religiosity and materiality in cultic sites and objects,[9] which function, in Jan Assmann's words, as "media for the production of divine proximity."[10] Sites and objects, both natural and manufactured, typically achieve cultic status as bridges between the worldly and the otherworldly, the visible and the invisible, by virtue of being consecrated or offered as a votive.[11] Animistic and fetishistic cults show, moreover,

1968), 150. On the poem's themes of aging and mortality, see C. Segal, *Lucretius on Death and Anxiety: Poetry and Philosophy in* De Rerum Natura (Princeton, 1990), esp. Ch. 5.

[7] D. Germano and K. Trainor, eds., *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia* (Albany, NY, 2004); R. H. Sharf, "On the Allure of Buddhist Relics," *Representations* 66 (1999): 75-99; J. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton, NJ: 2004).

[8] D. Byrne, "Buddhist Stupa and Thai Social Practice," *World Archaeology* 27, 2 (1995): 266-81; M. Peleggi, "The Unbearable Impermanence of Things: Reflections on Buddhism, Cultural Memory, and Heritage Conservation," in *Routledge Handbook of Heritage in Asia*, ed. P. Daly and T. Winter (London, 2012): 55-68.

[9] See, among others, D. Houtman and B. Meyer, eds, *Things: Religions and the Question of Materiality* (New York, 2012); D. Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London, 2010); C. Walker Bauman, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011).

[10] J. Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA, 2010), 71.

[11] K. Pomian, "The Collection: Between the Visible and the Invisible," in his *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice,* 1500-1800, trans. E. Wiles-Portier (Cambridge, 1990), 12. See also, I. Weinryb, ed., *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures* (New York, 2016). The members of the priestly council that in ancient Rome supervised the correct celebration of rites bore the title of pontifex, "bridge-builder," which after the advent of Christianity became a bishop's appellation, the council head's title of *pontifex maximus* passing onto the bishop of Rome, i.e.,

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that even ordinary objects may be perceived as belonging to "a world in itself, mysterious and evocative, … with which is possible to communicate, in the religious sphere, only through the language of the sacred."[12] It is thus not surprising that in premodern societies priests and priestesses acted as curators.[13] They did so by guarding and repairing religious edifices; bathing, anointing, and clothing holy images therein, as well as parading them in processions and, conversely, hiding them from raiders and iconoclasts; and composing inscriptions and chronicles about the life-histories of images and temples. Even craftsmen/restorers (no professional differentiation existed in most of the world until half a century ago) often had to undergo religious initiation or spiritual meditation before they could handle sacred matter.

When injured or "wounded,"[14] an artifact with sacred power demands cure because physical integrity is key to its efficacy, which damage and decay undermine by inhibiting inherence of the divine in it: "Repairing the object is thus also repairing harmony with the divine. The idea of 'prolonging the present' of the object is key; the time of making, breaking, and repairing are fused, so the object can continue to exist."[15] Devotional conservation seeks to maintain cultic sits and objects in an uncorrupted state befitting eternal time; for an icon or shrine that is consigned to historical time not only becomes ephemeral and deteriorates, but loses its thaumaturgic efficacy. In seeking to reconstitute an eternal present, devotional conservation's ultimate objective of is akin to rite's, which Lévi-Strauss defines as the abolition of time.[16] Mircea Eliade argued along similar lines for sacred time as "a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of or eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated

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the pope.

[12]R. Bodei, *The Life of Things, the Love of Things*, trans. M. Baca (New York, 2015), 26. Bodei's remark follows his assertion that it is the inanimateness of objects that makes them belong to a world different from living beings'. Several anthropologists argue, however, that is precisely the belief that things are or can be animated, and accordingly exert have agency, that motivates their allure. For a critical overview of the anthropological literature on this topic, see Janet Hoskins, "Agency, Biography and Objects," in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. C. Tilley et al. (London, 2006): 74-84.

[13]The Latin term *curator*, which in ancient Rome designated a superintendent of public works, is agentive of *cura*, a noun that encompasses the meanings of both its English derivative "cure" and the phonetically similar but etymologically distinct "care." Cf. the Italian expression *avere cura*, which translates into English as "to take care," while the verb curare and its reflexive form *curarsi* correspond to either "to cure (something/body or oneself)" or "to care for (something/-body)." But note the specialist verb "to curate (an exhibition)" (It., *curare una mostra*), which is an early twenty-century English coinage back-formed on "curator."

[14]"Wounded objects" was the title of an exhibition on traditional African restoration held at the Musée du Quay Branly, Paris: *Objects blessés. La réparation en Afrique* (Paris: 5 Continents Editions, 2007).

[15]M. M. Brooks, "Decay, Conservation and the Making of Meaning through Museum Objects," in *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*, ed. P. H. Smith, A. R. W. Meyers and H. J. Cook (reprint New York, 2017), 386.

[16]C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), 235-36.

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by means of rites."[17] Devotional conservation mirrors ritual's aim to uphold the eternal order of the cosmos, which in some cosmologies is figured as a broken vase in need of repair; at the same time, in contexts like the neo-Babylonian kingdoms and imperial Rome, the restoration of dilapidated sanctuaries was preparatory to the reactivation of cults, which in turn sanctified the political order via the authority of religious tradition.

Ona particular aspect of devotional conservation in ancient Athens is illuminated by a passage in Plutarch's "Lives of Theseus and Romulus" mentioning the state upkeep of the ship allegedly piloted by Theseus, the mythical slayer of the Minotaur and tutelary hero of Attica. The ship was venerated as a holy relic and deployed on ritual voyages to sacred destinations such as the sanctuary at Delos; Plutarch, himself a priest at Delphi, is unfortunately silent on the reasons why the ship's ceremonial journeys halted around 300 BCE. Elena Calandra takes Plutarch's observation that the cyclical replacement of the ship's aged wooden planks with new ones led philosophers to debate whether the ship was still Theseus's or had morphed into something else (a question concerning analytic ontology) to signal the emergence of novel notions on historical truth and authenticity in the intellectual context of the second-century CE in which Plutarch composed his *Parallel Lives*.[18] But what matters here is that the use of Theseus's ship as a sacred means of transport connected Athenians to the eternal time of myth; this function required the ship's routine maintenance until its retirement from Athens' social and religious life.

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Devotional conservation, as I have theorized it here, might appear far remote from the impassable quandary between ideological manipulation and commercial exploitation in which national monuments and museums have been caught up since the late twentieth century—at least according to the critics of the "heritage industry."[19] The experience of museum-visiting has, in fact, been persuasively likened by Carol Duncan to a secular ritual—"the ritual of citizenship"—that is celebrated, like religious rituals, in a "space carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special kind of attention." Duncan argues that it is not just the neoclassical style of nineteenth-century museum buildings in Europe, North America and the ex-British colonies that marks off their space culturally, but the behavior visitors are expected to display therein—bodily decorum, contemplation, even awe—that makes museums "sites which enable individuals to achieve liminal experience—to move beyond the

[17] M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (Orlando, FL, 1959), 70.

[18] E. Calandra, "Plutarco o del restauro," in *Arte e memoria culturale nell'eta della Seconda Sofistica,* ed. M. Galli and O. D. Cordovana (Catania, 2007), 57-66.

[19] K. Hewinson, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987): 69-84.

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psychic constrains of mundane existence, *step out of time*, and attain new, larger perspectives."[20] Duncan's reflections resonate with Jas Elsner's evocation of the context of Greco-Roman "ritual-centered viewing" as "a special space set apart from ordinary life … [a] liminal space [where] the viewer enters the god's world and likewise the deity intrudes directly into the viewer's world."[21] Theorization of premodern conservation as a transcultural practice can take clues from the concept of visuality as the socially constructed and historically situated practice of viewing.

[20] C. Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York, 1995), 10, 12 (emphasis added).

[21] J. Elsner, "Between Mimesis and Divine Power: Visuality in the Greco-Roman World," in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. R. Nelson (Cambridge, 2000), 61. See also J. Elsner, ed., *Art and Text in Roman Culture* (Cambridge, 1996).

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